

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ February 2008

Retiring in a College Town

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Sixty some years ago, in the fall of 1946, I entered the Freshman Class of the University of Michigan. My father had graduated from the university in 1913, and his brother, my uncle, received his degree a few years later. I had just turned twenty-one, was single, and could not foresee that I would one day marry and have three daughters, who, one after the other, would find their way to Ann Arbor and receive a diploma from what was now “my school.”

In 1946, the campus was awash in men and women who, a year before, had been in uniform serving their country in what would forever be known as World War II. My 2/20 vision without glasses kept me from enlisting but not from the draft, and, since I was in otherwise good health and did not have flat feet, I was assigned to the Navy Seabees and spent two years, eight months, and six days in service, most of it in the Pacific Islands. My Presbyterian pastor, E. Howard McClintock, thought there was something providential in the relative safety of my being a Seabee. Although we were trained to fire an M1 Carbine, we were not considered combat troops. Indeed, we were everyone's friend — maintaining airstrips, building roads, constructing bases for the occupying troops. The Seabees had two mottos. One was: “The difficult we do today, the impossible takes us a bit longer,” and the other was “We Build . . . We Fight.” Fortunately for the furthering of the war effort, we built more than we fought.

During the early weeks of my university career, I was awed by the immense possibilities for study, and as a result, I wanted to taste as much as possible of what the university had to offer. I had not settled on a career choice. My role models were teachers, pastors, and musicians, so each one of these professions loomed as a possibility. During my senior year, still in the throes of indecision, I had a talk with Mary Needham, an instructor in English whom I greatly admired. I shared with her the three paths open to me as well as the difficulty I was having in choosing one of them. “Maybe you need a year to sort things out,” she said, and added, “Have you considered spending a year at a European university?” When she learned that I had taken twenty hours of German, she said, “You should go to Heidelberg,” and go to Heidelberg I did.

A year of total immersion in the finer aspects of the German language together with evenings spent in a *weinstube* singing German folk songs over glasses of Mosel wine was followed by yet another year earning a Masters in Comp Lit back at Michigan. During this year, music and

teaching receded into the background. In the fall of 1952, I went off to New York and Union Seminary, where I had the good fortune to study with Paul Tilich, Reinholdt Niebuhr, and Cyril Richardson. (I don't often engage in name-dropping, but these were really important people in my life.)

One day during my senior year of seminary feeling I needed a bit of Anglican polish, I left Union after two years, and enrolled at and graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary. One day during my senior year I received a letter from C. George Widdifield, the rector of All Saints' Church, Pontiac, Michigan. My beloved bishop, Richard Stanley Merrill Emrich, had recommended me to be George's curate. I can still remember standing in the seminary post office reading the letter in utter disbelief. After years of preparation, I still could not take in the miracle that a church might want me as its minister. I served in Michigan, Rhode Island, and New York, ten of those years on the faculty of General Theological Seminary.

During my Rhode Island years (1990-2000), I would return to Ann Arbor to visit my youngest daughter, Leela, her husband and two children. During each visit, we would discuss the possibility of moving back to Michigan during my retirement years. I was undecided, but eventually resolved to move. Thanks to the clergy resettlement allowance provided by the Church Pension Fund, I was able to buy a little house within walking distance of both the campus and downtown Ann Arbor. I brought my two-year-old Great Pyrenees dog, Bella, with me. Together we kept house; that is, I kept house while removing swirls of white fur from sofa and carpets. I now take in all the concerts, dance, opera, and theater the University has to offer, and every once in a while, I walk the diagonal at the center of campus and imagine I am on my way to Mrs. Needham's English class. I believe the last few years have been the fulfillment of the saying, "The best is yet to come."

Moral: If you or someone you know is considering relocation for retirement, a college town (preferably your own) is a great choice. You can then throw away all those "How to Stay Young While Growing Old" books.



Lew Towler, now living in a house by the side of the road with Bella, is back studying piano (mostly Bach and Debussy), reading blockbuster biographies, walking with his dog, and enjoying being an adopted member of his daughter Leela's family.